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AUTHOR Bauer, Norman J.
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ABSTRACT

Diversity is rapidly becoming one of America's most prominent virtues, while also creating one of its most vexing problems. This paper examines the dilemma created by increased diversity, which is how to respect the rights of others while maintaining some sense of unity. The growth of religious pluralism, in particular, illustrates this tension. The free-exercise principles in the First Amendment have guaranteed equal opportunity for all members of society to publicly practice and express their religious beliefs. These principles form the center of America's civic religion, which binds people together in a common set of values. It is argued that the metaphor of the "melting pot" be replaced with that of the "round table," which guarantees the right of all individuals and organizations to campaign for their particular ends, thus promoting a powerful national "pluribus" while being guided by the common values inherent in American civic religion. (LMI)

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THE ROUND TABLE AND OUR CIVIC RELIGION

Norman J. Bauer, Ed.D.

Professor of Social Foundations of Education

State University of New York

Geneseo, New York

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History is always an evolving story, based upon facts often with prescriptive and moral implications. The story of America is no exception. As the moral ramifications of these facts have evolved we have become aware that the lasting contributions of our founders were not the statements they made, or the inclusion of citations from some of these statements in the structures of many of our prized public buildings, but rather the ideas which they embedded in these statements. James Madison, for instance, created such novel constitutional notions as representation, federalism, separation of powers, judicial review, and the nonestablishment and free exercise principles relative to religious beliefs and practices which were eventually included in the very first sentence of the First Amendment.

Emerging out of the critique of religious orthodoxy and governmental oppression which was generated by the Enlightenment, these potentially liberating ideas were grounded in principles of law, not in arbitrary force; in the right of all people to vote, not only certain classes; in the equal right of all to participate in their government, not in the hereditary rights

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of a few; in constitutional principles, not in arbitrary monarchical, oligarchical or tyrannical dictates; in due-process, not in unilateral judgements. Forged during a time when many of these ideas were but images of moral ends to be pursued, these conceptions became through time our national beacon, our common center, our civic religion, radiating their powerful implications and energizing various segments of our population to transform them into reality. The national moral development which they generated was forged through extended, bitter, often savage struggles. As a consequence our national reality has changed, and continues to change, dramatically.

Both the independence, the sovereignty, the 'unum' of the political domain, and the ever growing multiplicity of perspectives, the 'pluribus' of our cultural domain, have begun to emerge with increasing clarity. Indeed, the E pluribus unum ideal which was, *in theory,* destined to guide our national development, enabled the pluralities in the private sector of America increasingly to transform our culture in ways which are enabling increasing numbers of persons, of institutions, to pursue their unique ends, to flourish in enlarging ways. This has dramatically changed the dominant uniform national culture which has prevailed and which, throughout much of our history, has induced most immigrants to dismiss their backgrounds, to be, as J. Hector St. John metaphorically proclaimed as early as 1782, " ... melted into a new race of men ... "

This inexorable change has been evolving and increasingly affecting our nation since World War II; highlighted by the rich,

dynamic plurality of our national demography in terms of economic class, of geography, of sexuality, of gender, of private religious faith. No longer do people coming to this country find themselves urged, often subtly, as they did during our first 175 years, to shed their cultural rootedness. Indeed, many today wish to retain their cultural identity. No longer, in other words, is Mr. St. John's meaphorical 'melting pot' as appropriate an image for thinking about our nation as it once may have been.

Diversity, with the multiple perspectives which it brings, is rapidly becoming one of our nation's most prominent virtues; while also creating, perhaps, one of its most vexing problems. A virtue because it is increasingly liberating people from restraints, not without significant opposition, which heretofore have prevented them from developing their fullest humanhood; a problem because it raises the very serious question of what it is that we all hold in common; what it is that prevents our society from 'flying apart'.

This problem can be seen in bold relief when one observes the growth of religious pluralism in America. No longer is our country comprised only of many different Christian sects. During th past fifty years we have witnessed the rapid growth of Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, Taoism, and many other less prominent religions. Some of these are based on revelation, others not; some are based on theological monotheism, others on theological polytheism; some are based on cosmological beliefs, others not; some are highly mythical, others minimally so; some are credal, others not. One can claim with confidencethat the

growth of these many religious persuasions has emerged here in America because all of them have been tolerated and protected by the nonestablishment and free exercise principles in our First Amendment. These principles guarantee equal opportunity to all to engage in whatever private faith and practice they wish, and, freely and publicly, to share and transmit their messages wherever and whenever they desire, without political intrusion, in the American religious marketplace.

Indeed, these principles, embedded in our Declaration of Independence, in our Constitution and its amendments, constitute the core, the hub, the common center, of our nation. These principles constitute our common national faith and belief system, our national civic religion, radiating continuously and in all directions their refreshing and enlarging rays of moral energy. Our civic religion enables all of us in whatever dimension of life, whatever our ends, to recognize the existence of the common center, the common belief system, the integrating set of values upon which our country rests and which bind us together in a powerful 'unum'.

A 'center', of course, implies an 'outer'. Together they suggest a metaphor to guide our thinking as we continue our national evolution amd move into the 21st century: *round table.* Clearly everyone has a right to a place at the table, young and old, poor and rich, gays and straights, less educated and more educated, dissensually inclined and consensually inclined, unchurched and churched. Each institution, each person, has a right to campaign for their particular ends, thereby forging the

evolution of an increasingly powerful national 'pluribus', while being guided by the common values inherent in our civic religion.